

As school district homeless Liaison, I ensure all students who are homeless are able to immediately enroll in school, stay in the same school when it is in their best interest, receive transportation, and participate fully in all educational activities in our district. I also ensure that their parents are able to fully participate and support their child(ren's) education, and I provide special assistance for youth who are homeless on their own.

Let me give you a feel for what this looks like in real life-

Last week, I met with an 18-year-old that HUD does not consider homeless, although public schools do - he cannot access any HUD services because of HUD eligibility definitions. He has serious mental health and intellectual/learning challenges. But he is not homeless according to HUD because he is sleeping on the floor at a 19-year-old's apartment with some other kids. He falls asleep during the day because he doesn't sleep well at night, and he only sporadically takes his psych meds because he hasn't developed the discipline yet. He worries because all his clothes are dirty and he doesn't have a washing machine or money to go to the laundry. Schools-Liaisons like me- consider him homeless- and he has the telltale educational barriers that go with homelessness - sleepy, dirty clothes not often changed,

poor attendance, not turning in homework--and we can help with the educational supports, but this young man really needs housing *supports and this homeless student is why I am here to tell* you that the disparity in education and HUD definitions means this kid cannot access the help to get him off that floor--- the only way HUD will help him is if he goes to an adult shelter or sleeps outside in the Iowa weather, neither are acceptable options. The definition needs to change.

The Numbers

Last week, in preparation for this visit, I ran the numbers to see what our homeless data tells us. Six years ago we identified 286 Homeless Children and Youth. So far this academic year, just over half way through the year, we have already identified and worked with 413 homeless students and their families. So- in my 6 years' time with the district, in a community with a 3% unemployment rate that fared pretty well during the housing crisis and recession, we will almost DOUBLE the number of homeless students we educate and serve. I'd say we have had some big change.

...But a full 75% of our Homeless students --over 300 so far this year - are not included in the HUD definition of homeless!! If they were, our community could give the families and youth a hand up from homelessness --hope for the

future- support in acquiring housing- but the HUD definition has not changed. Our community doesn't even get to make the decision about the best use of our homeless monies. Ignoring these youth and families is not OK- we need to let each community's Cont of Care use their needs assessments to determine which homeless populations are served.

The HUD definition doesn't match the reality of family homelessness. Families must be staying in a shelter or living outside in the Iowa winter to qualify for short term HUD homeless assistance. This means that they are not eligible for Rapid Rehousing, case management and housing assistance through HUD. The HUD definition keeps the door slammed shut on hope for basic housing. And you know what- this affects the students learning, and their future contributions to our world.

Now, you might think we are in Iowa- we are a people known for our "Iowa Nice", anyone from Iowa knows what I'm talking about-we are helpful and kind people...so that living in an inexpensive hotel or doubled up with family, friends and yes, even strangers wouldn't be so bad in Iowa "iowa nice". And really-. Big families with 5 or more people and sometimes 2 or more families fill up single rooms- 2 beds- in our cheapest motels.

Are motels really that bad? – well one of these motels provides permanent addresses to 7 registered sex offenders; all but one of these fellows committed multiple crimes against children. One of these motels was home to a 21-year old woman who pimped her 16-year-old sister and a 20-year-old woman who brought her 3 month old baby on her dates. We have a documented history of sex trafficking in our motels --- we are right off the interstate... and we're a college town so we seem like a good place to peddle drugs and young girls.

The least expensive motel occupied by most of our families, the one with 7 registered sex offenders, had 407 police calls last year, the next three had just over 100 police calls each. Constant sirens, people arrested, fights and crime. Think about your kids, and grandkids and their sense of safety and security when living in situations like this. No parent wants to keep her kids in a cheap hotel, and families don't think this is an appropriate home.

I cannot stress to you enough the importance of the answer to the question "*Who is homeless*". These folks in cheap motels are- they've been evicted or forced to move out -there are financial hardships and serious barriers which prevent them from getting their families into stable, affordable housing- yet these folks aren't eligible for any homeless assistance from HUD only because of the difference in HUD's Definition and the reality of family and youth

homelessness. I urge our lawmakers to include families with children and Unaccompanied students living in motels in the HUD definition, and to let the Homeless Liaison in each Local Education Area verify that homeless status.

Hotel situations are bad, but doubled-up situation are no better. One of our high poverty, overcrowded elementary schools (600 kids, over 80% poverty) has a nearby complex with over 400- 2-bedroom apartments – and it comes move-in ready with cockroaches and bed-bugs. I've had the roaches just saunter over these very boots, broad daylight- without a care in the world.

Many families move in with their poor relatives and friends to these 2 bedroom units, and sleep on the floors without beds and blankets, surrounded by cockroach feces, bitten by bedbugs, as they try to sleep. Some of the families I work with live in 2 bedroom apartments with as many as 17-20 people, as families try to work minimum wage jobs, balance childcare, and meet transportation and basic needs, as they save up for deposits, first and last months rent.

Now you might think these families are just poorly or inadequately housed, and really what's so bad about that? From the school's perspective, we know that many of these families are constantly on the move. Friends and relatives usually cannot have a guest stay longer than 10-14 days, and that is if

everyone is getting along. Friends and Family get real old after 3-4 days, especially if they cannot contribute to expenses and these homeless families and kids can be, and often are- kicked out without notice, many times leaving their belongings in the morning and later finding out they cannot go back and retrieve them-important things like school library books. This constant moving is traumatizing for kids and gets in the way of their learning, as they get set back academically 3-6 months with every move. So if you ask me if this is just inadequate housing I will tell you NO – IT IS HOMELESSNESS. Being doubled up is usually a very temporary option that doesn't tend to work out well.

The Gatekeeper for HUD Assistance

In our community we have Shelter Space for about 20 school age kids and about that many kids under age 5. Most of our 415 homeless students never- ever- have a chance to even get a glimpse of what that hand up from HUD is about. That is because the hand-up, HUD's short term assistance, is only available for people meeting the HUD definition of Homeless-in the shelter or on the streets, which does not include students who are couch surfing, doubled up and living in motels. Fixing the HUD definition to include these

students and their families is critical to the education, health and safety of these students.

What would be different if this legislation were passed today, and our County's Cont of Care decided to use some of the money to assist homeless youth and families- the ones like I talked about earlier- bouncing around ... well, the school aged kids would be less traumatized and maybe able to start learning and certainly the kids and the homeless youth would be in safer living situations and not such close proximity to the sorts of people who prey on vulnerable youth. What would happen if the doubled up families were able to access housing supports? Well the kids 0-5 kids might be able to access some of those positive early childhood programs that we know make a difference- that is if they aren't bouncing around town to a different location every 2 weeks and we know the early childhood foundation gives us the best bang for our buck...lasting benefits...

If we are serious about working smarter on this problem, let's use what we know, and allow the Continuum of Care to determine community needs. I ask you though, please do not let the best advice to the 18 year old homeless youth sleeping on a floor, the one with serious barriers to getting his diploma- the one I talked about when I first came up here- don't let my advice be – if

you really want help bad- you need to go try to get in the adult shelter.... Or, if you cannot get in the shelter, just go sleep under the bridge down by the Iowa river, because we cannot help you unless you are in a shelter or living outside.

Thank you.